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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE, NSC FOR WATERS/ABRAMS/SINGH

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TAGS: [KWBG](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: PRISONERS' AFFAIRS MINISTER ON PRISONERS RELEASE,
GAZA AND INTERNATIONAL MEETING

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. On July 24, newly appointed Minister of Prisoners' Affairs Ashraf al-Ajrami told PolChief that he welcomed the July 20 release of 256 prisoners, but criticized the "unilateral" nature of the release and urged Palestinian-Israeli negotiations on criteria for the release of more prisoners. Al-Ajrami said he plans to meet with the head of the Israeli Prison Authority August 5 to discuss prison conditions and additional releases. He said the Ministry moved all its files from Gaza to Ramallah after Hamas' takeover of Gaza, but continues to pay stipends to prisoners' families in Gaza. Bio note at para 8. End Summary.

Ministry of Prisoners' Affairs

¶2. (C) Al-Ajrami said the Ministry of Prisoners' Affairs' main job is to ensure prisoners are treated properly -- including access to lawyers -- and to provide their families with stipends. Upon prisoners' release, the Ministry is responsible to help with rehabilitation and reintegration into society, providing living stipends and in some cases, vocational training.

¶3. (C) According to al-Ajrami, there are approximately 400 Ministry of Prisoners' Affairs employees in the West Bank and Gaza. Al-Ajrami said the Ministry transferred all files from Gaza to Ramallah after Hamas' takeover of Gaza, and Hamas has prevented Gaza employees from communicating with the Ramallah-based Ministry. He added that the Ministry continues to pay stipends to prisoners' families who live in Gaza, but noted that some 90 percent of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails are from the West Bank. On the Ministry's budget, al-Ajrami said the Swiss Development Corporation (SDC - the international assistance agency of the Swiss government) has provided budget support, but plans to reduce its funding from USD five to three million. Al-Ajrami said it will be difficult to manage the Ministry with such few funds.

Release of pre-Oslo Prisoners Top Priority

¶4. (C) Al-Ajrami said the Ministry is providing the 256 Palestinian prisoners released July 20 with stipends and will try to help them find jobs. He said 256 of the nearly 11,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails is "a very small number." Al-Ajrami added that the top priority on his agenda is to secure the release of the 361 prisoners from the pre-Oslo period, 65 of whom have been jailed over 20 years. "Arriving at an agreement on this issue with Israel is the only way to move the political process forward," he said. He added that the "street view" in the West Bank and Gaza is

that all prisoners are "freedom fighters" and that releasing a large number of prisoners, including Marwan Barghouti, will increase Palestinian popular support for PA President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and the new government. He added that Palestinians perceive the pre-Oslo prisoners in particular as heroes, because of their long incarceration, and all agree they should be released first.

¶5. (C) Al-Ajrami said Abu Mazen's requests for the joint Israeli-Palestinian Prisoners Committee to meet have been turned down by the GoI. Al-Ajrami said he plans to meet with the head of the Israeli Prison Authority on August 5 and also hopes to meet with GoI Minister of Public Security Avi Dichter and Deputy Minister of Defense Matan Vilnai. In the meetings, al-Ajrami plans to discuss prison conditions for Palestinians and the release of pre-Oslo prisoners. Al-Ajrami commented that he wants to see prisoners - especially pre-Oslo prisoners - released as a result of political negotiation, not in exchange for the Hamas-abducted IDF Cpl Shalit, and that the GoI should provide political credit to Abu Mazen, not Hamas, for prisoners' release.

Speaking Out Against Settlement Activity

¶6. (C) Al-Ajrami said that settlement building in the West Bank must be halted and all outposts should be removed. On July 25, al-Ajrami told Voice of Palestine radio and PBC television that the recent demonstration at Homesh is another attempt by Israeli settlers to take more land from Palestinians and urged the international community to pressure the GoI to end all settlement activity.

Bio Note

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¶7. (C) Ahsraf al-Ajrami is an independent from Gaza, but associated with Fatah. He worked in the PA Information Ministry as Director of Israeli Affairs since 1996. As an author, researcher and freelance journalist, al-Ajrami recently published a professional paper called, "Religious Speech in the Media and Human Rights." He has a BA in English. He was born in Jabaliya Refugee Camp in 1961. (Note: Concluding the June 24 meeting, al-Ajrami joked that all employees at the Ministry of Prisoners' Affairs, from the Minister to the janitor, have served time in Israeli jails. Al-Ajrami was in prison from 1984-1996. End note).

WALLES